

Artificial Landscapes

Dorothee Bauerle-Willert

It is not a paradox, but a long history. Nor is it a simple contradiction: landscape as a part of nature is nearly always created, formed, and structured by following artificial principles, i.e. principles which are not of 'natural' nature, but of man who designs and constructs his world. And *vice versa*, our experience of landscape has, for a long time, been nourished and formed by an aesthetic view. Without a doubt, one can state, in the discovery of the sublime of nature as aesthetics of the infinite, a totality of the subject in place of the totality of nature – a replacement and an extreme subjectivisation, which is already stamped by a metaphorical image-production. In this respect, one can say that, ever since the 18th century, a central category of modernity has been the artificial. First, this artificiality expresses a definitive farewell to nature as something that we experience immediately, as something which speaks of God or the gods. Since the end of the 18th century, we have lived without that kind of nature: the fullness and intensity of the environmental wholeness is of the past. The gods went away and not even the nature philosophy of romanticism could re-animate that nature and its gods. That artificiality – deplored as a loss, for example, by Friedrich Schiller or glorified as a win as it is in the poems and essays of Charles Baudelaire – provided the condition for new myths – the myth of the city as the antagonist of nature and the myth of poetry itself. From Baudelaire, the surrealist movement and Walter Benjamin to the New York films of Woody Allen, these myths are now the *a priori* of the modern process, connected in a very special way: the experience of modernity is fostered by the rise of the modern city, and works of modernism convey these experiences, the shocks and conflict, detailing the various strategies for surviving them. One cannot erase the development, not even by a leap over reflection (Bohrer 1988: 210–211). But a new myth not only takes the place of the old one, the old concept of nature nests like a residue in the modern comprehension, and landscape turns into an image, into a sign. The

modern idea of the city as landscape reveals the Janus of the construction of the modern myth. Walter Benjamin's notes for *The Arcades Project* (1999), in which Paris appears as the capital of the 19th century, show the process of configuration of the images of the metropolis. He refers to Paul Ernest de Rattier, who paints a dreamlike Paris, a Paris that absorbs the most remote landscapes:

Paris will be the world, and the universe will be Paris. The savannahs and the pampas and the Black Forest will compose the public gardens of this greater Lutetia; the Alps, the Pyrenees, the Andes, the Himalayas will be the Aventine and the scenic hills of this incomparable city – knolls of pleasure, study, or solitude. (Benjamin 1999: 137; quoting Paul Ernest de Rattier's fantasies, titled *Paris n'existe pas* (*Paris Does Not Exist*), 1857.)

The interplay of city and cosmic space, of metropolis and earth, of town and the interior, which Benjamin focuses on, is comparable to a perception evoked by the use of drugs and, indeed, for Benjamin street names are intoxicating substances, making our perception more multi-layered and richer than usual, infusing the most common with other, stranger meanings. The uncontrolled conjuration of images, the penetration of images, provokes cyclic states, so enigmatic. These cyclic states refer to a mythical world in which there is no history but only stories, in which there is no progress, only the eternal return of the same. In such visions, the city can be transformed into a hunting ground – a notion of Theodor W. Adorno's in a letter to Benjamin, which shows that the rural is not at all seen as an idyllic place *à la* Rousseau (Benjamin 1999: 420) –, into plains and deserts:

There is the Place du Maroc in Belleville; that desolate heap of stones with its rows of tenements became for me, when I happened on it one Sunday afternoon, not only a Moroccan desert but also, and at the same time, a monument of colonial imperialism; and topographic vision was entwined with allegorical meaning in this square, yet not for an instant did it lose its place in the heart of Belleville.

(Benjamin 1999: 852.)

In such an intersecting of images from the most hybrid sources, nothing stays what it is, everything can change its form from one moment to the next and, under the eyes of the *flâneur*, the metropolis is as mysterious as the jungles of the new world. The familiar always bears the possibility of provoking an unrestricted and unexpected flow of images; everyday sights might change into unknown continents, might tell distant or discarded stories. The city turns into a locus of most contradictory constellations, into a place of a double-bind progress, of

a progress that is rooted in the idea of catastrophe, but, in a sort of paradox jolt, 'The idea of the eternal recurrence conjures out of the misery of time the speculative idea (or the phantasmagoria) of luck.'¹ (Benjamin 1974: 683.)

In his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (2006), in which Benjamin evokes his early memories, many episodes reveal similarities between city and landscape:

Not to find one's way around the city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in the city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley. (Benjamin 2006: 53–54.)

Benjamin circles around the secret correspondence between the archaic and the modern, the present converts to a trace of natural history. The city is sea, wood, submarine, labyrinth and abyss – a place of very antinomic principles. In the sphere of the production of the artificial, Benjamin encounters something mythological or natural, something that shows magic, that is – as the myth – not the result of a conscious procedure, a magic we cannot control, as we fail in the control of modern life. Like a counterpoint of that transformation from city to landscape, Benjamin sees the panoramas as the entering into, or the salvation of, landscapes in the city:

One sought tirelessly, through technical devices, to make panoramas the scenes of a perfect imitation of nature. An attempt was made to reproduce the changing daylight in the landscape, the rising moon, the rush of waterfalls. <Jacques-Louis> David counsels his pupils to draw from nature as it is shown in panoramas. In their attempt to produce deceptively lifelike changes in represented nature, the panoramas prepare the way not only for photography but for <silent> film and sound film. (Benjamin 1999: 5.)

The basic idea of the panoramas (of Jacques Daguerre and others), as they developed in the 19th century, was to create an artistic-artificial image, true to an extent that the viewer believes is seen, believes to have a real nature. To make that illusion perfect, the image has to completely surround the visitor, to envelop him; this is also necessary to make the comparison with reality impossible. In the panoramas, pictorial spaces were produced in which the viewer moves around like the *flâneur* in the city space (Oettermann 1980: 41). The city expands to

¹ 'Die Idee der ewigen Wiederkehr zaubert aus der Misere der Zeit die spekulative Idee (oder die Phantasmagorie) des Glücks hervor.' (English translation by the author.)

a virtual landscape, and its diffusion coincides with the establishment of the arcades, where the past has become space. The arcades, spreading throughout Europe, as did the panoramas, opened the view to an ideal panorama of primitive times, which have not yet passed completely.

Here resides the last dinosaur of Europe, the consumer. On the walls of these caverns, their immemorial flora, the commodity, luxuriates and enters, like cancerous tissue, into the most irregular combinations. A world of secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster, hair dryer and Venus de Milo, prosthesis and letter-writing manual come together here as after a long separation. The odalisque lies in wait next to the inkwell, priestesses raise aloft ashtrays like patens. These items on display are a rebus....
(Benjamin 1999 : 874.)

It was also an arcade that presented for Louis Aragon the first and most typical landscape of the new aesthetic of surrealist perception; even more the Café Certa in the Passage de l'Opéra was for him the birth-place of the surrealist movement (Fürnkäs 1988: 23), one of the *carrefours* in the surrealist topography of Paris, 'where mysterious signals flash up out of the traffic, where unthinkable analogies and crossings of happenings are on the daily agenda.'² (Benjamin 1989: 301.) This is the space that is represented in surrealist literature. In Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant (Le Paysan de Paris)*, a book that Walter Benjamin loved very much and that served him as a guide through the mythical topography of Paris, Aragon, sitting in the café in Paris is correlating the *aisthesis* and the *poesis* of the surrealist observation with the objective construction of the arcades.

And how easy it is, amid this enviable peace, to start daydreaming. Reverie imposes its presence, unaided. Here, Surrealism resumes all its rights. They give you a glass inkwell with a champagne cork for a stopper, and you are away! Images, images everywhere. On the ceiling. In the armchairs wickerwork. in the glasses' drinking straws. In the telephone switch board. In the sparkling air. In the iron lanterns which light the room. Snow down, images, it is Christmas. Snow down upon the barrels and upon credulous hearts. Snow on people's hair and on their hands. But yes, a prey to the fretful agitation of waiting – for I am expecting someone, and have already combed my hair three times in anticipation – I draw back a curtain from the window and find myself immediately absorbed by the scene in the passage, its comings and goings, its passers-by.
(Aragon 1994: 81–82.)

² '...an denen geisterhafte Signale aus dem Verkehr aufblitzen, unvordenkliche Analogien und Verschränkungen von Geschehnissen an der Tagesordnung sind.' (English translation by the author.)

The descriptions of the arcades of this strange hybrid, for example, the Passage de l'Opéra, are marked by metaphors of submarine plants. But the semantic structure of the surrealist text and the isolated nature metaphor are such that the surrealist image of nature deals not with a substantial evocation of nature as such (Bohrer 1998: 105). Rather, Aragon deals with inorganic-fantastic chains of metaphors. The transformation of social locations into something fantastic, something as strange as the submarine world, is right from the beginning subject to Charles Baudelaire's verdict of the naturally beautiful. In such constructions the shop window of a shop of walking sticks has something of the fluorescence of fishes, bathed in green light. And – as a shock – Aragon experiences the rushing of shells, he recognises: 'The whole ocean in the arcade de l'Opéra! The canes floated gently like seaweed....' (Aragon 1994: 22.) Without doubt, Aragon does not intend the reconstruction of something sentimentally bucolic, nor is he interested in the salvation of nature *à la* Rousseau. His images of landscape are isolated signs/signifiers, broken out of the natural context; they are elements in an artificial metaphorical system. The narrative of Aragon's text does not create a mimetic reproduction of locations and times – nature always means a metaphoric construction in a chain of associations. It is not the transformation of civilisation into nature; rather, it is the possibility of the magical appearance itself, the character of the surrealist epiphany in the frame of the strictly civilisatory (Bohrer 1998: 100). The imposing of the nature-signs is purely functional; simultaneously, they could be denaturalised to the border of the grotesque. It deals with the surrealist imagination, which encounters the marvellous in the trivial – and Aragon places the hills of Buttes-Chaumont as one of his favourite examples for the wonderful and the bizarre. This is not the presentation of a natural landscape, of a wood, a lake, but of a park that Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann installed in 1864–1867 in East Paris, over dung-pits and quarries. For Aragon the garden is an element of an arcane part to be discovered in the city. Precisely its artificiality, with lakes and artificial rocks, provides the impulse for his empathy.

Every lingering remnant in adults' memory of the atmosphere of enchanted forests, every last vestige in them of belief in miracles, every breath of theirs which still inhales a perfume of fairytales reveals itself beneath the wretched, crazed disguise of these feebly invented landscapes, and exposes man and his senseless treasure-chest filled with intellectual trinkets, his superstitions, his ravings. Here he squats, surrounded by

all the round pebbles he could find, counting them and laughing: He is happy.
(Aragon 1994: 120.)

The garden is by no means an alternative to the metropolis, born out of cultural criticism. Only as an integral part of that metropolis, the park is to be perceived in a surrealist manner. That means: as the metropolis, it is storing up images, which are not pictures of nature, but figures of exoticism (Bohrer 1998: 109).

The daily marvellous finds its theory in the concept of the myth of Aragon as the factory of the unconscious. Like Walter Benjamin, Aragon constructs an analogy between the modern myths and the antique myths of nature – its power and its magic come from the same source. But the modern signs are a construction; the term ‘totality’ does not fit anymore. It cannot be the substitution of nature’s totality by that of the subject, because the subject itself lacks this concept. It is a stranger to him: because there is no concept of the identity of the subject anymore, there is no symmetrical substitution; rather, there is a completely wild invention with the name ‘image’ – and nature, the landscape, is only the medium for that booming image machine.

In a big jump through geography and time, I want to show that the attitude of the *flâneur* still bears a certain seduction, but possible only under specific postmodernist conditions. Belgrade is a chameleon-like metropolis. Its history, its past, does not live on in monuments; rather, it is there in an invisible substratum: cultures and epochs, which have decomposed like leaves in the soil, in a multi-layered, fertile humus in which this manifold city has put its roots, which constantly renovates itself – a germ-spot of metamorphosis. The artists Nenad Jeremić and Vukašin Nedelković are working with that incredibly vital capital, destroyed and reconstructed so often. In their videos, they explore this metaphoric city space, with floating images produced by a certain view of their surroundings, transforming, alienating the most familiar. Their video piece *L2 and the Towers* consists of twelve video scenes and a map, showing the space of their shooting. The project researches and consumes their neighbourhood. L2 is the name of a Belgrade coffee shop; the three towers are three 32-floor skyscrapers, forming the so-called eastern gate of Belgrade. For the artists, this is an area that offers a lot of opportunities for the appearance of social, economic, and cultural conflicts, by observing the structure of the area under the key words escapism, social moment, and urbanism. The videos assimilate themselves in their composition to their object – but perhaps the approach is transferable to

other, even stranger environments. The project is not only a research project, a neutral observation of things, but it is also a personal action: the artists attempt a poetic reconciliation between themselves and their surroundings. Conflicts always emerge out of differences and misunderstandings between people of different cultural, economic, and social profiles, who nevertheless live together in the same area. The idea of the artists points in the direction of consuming something strange, something that may look decadent, or retro – in the sense of stepping out of the circle of social, economic, cultural and other oppositions. To do so it is necessary to change one's perspective, to give up established and unquestioned viewpoints and attitudes. Only in the escape from a comfortable conformism, can content, form and images be perceived in an open-minded way – one condition for overcoming internal and external conflicts and the intention of starting with very intimate concerns. Of course, by imagining, transcending, and playing with the city, with its images and myths, structures of spaces don't change. It is not to be expected that something transforms its inherent order only because of personal desires. This unpleasant fact probably has to be accepted, but in a very conscious, self-reflecting way, with complete awareness, with poetic and scientific means (Jeremić 2003: 1).

For another kind of exploration of urban spaces, the artists Rena and Vladan Jeremić invented Sendi. Sendi is a quasi-apparatus, which makes it possible to send and receive unexpected signals. Their videos document acts of spontaneous finding and combining of things and experiences. Their practice refers to something like a mini-scheme of communication, but it happens in the dusty area underneath the determined meanings of the common grounds. The Sendi practice does not accept that consensus and convention are the basis of communication; rather it conflicts with paradigms of transparency and standardisation. It is a clownesque doubting, in the info-imperative, of the free flow of communication. The artists found the parts (or categories) for their apparatus in two sources. The first one was the Cvetko Market, not far from the artist's flat in Belgrade. There people sell things they have sorted out from the trash. These things have completely lost their original meaning, they are in a quite rudimentary state, their value is fictional and their price is symbolic. The second place they visited in order to construct the Sendi apparatus is the Chinese Market in New Belgrade. The goods sold there are like cheap versions of dreams. They are pseudo-products, which only simulate or imitate standards. Precisely for that reason, they seem to be useful

to the artists. Within the microcosm-like and invisible, but strictly regulated world of the Chinese market, they initialise Sendi and Sendi practice: the act of receiving and sending signals that are objectively not present is a reflection of the utopia that lies inside of communication technique. And within the comical displacement of this act, within the autistic ignoring of the reference system, the last free act manifests itself, but at the same time there is also a shattering of utopias (Jeremić, Jeremić 2004: 16–19).

Both video works invest the urban space, its recess and margins, with meaning, memory and desire; both works deal with moments of miraculous, but bewildering, experiences as reaction and product of the kaleidoscopic urban environment, offering the possibility of oceanic connection. They are snapshots of a world permanently in flux.

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